Distant Stars

HANOI – 1976

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Editor's Note

The Watchmaker of Dien Bien Phu, *published in 1971, was a collection of short stories written in the period between 1945 and 1964 and depicting certain aspects of our people's struggle against foreign aggression and for socialist construction.*

The present collection includes stories written after 1965, when US war escalation started against the North of our country.

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LE MINH KHUE

There are three of us — three girls living in a cave at the foot of a hill. A road passes in front of us, climbs the hill and then goes off somewhere far away. It's a disemboweled road, gutted by bombs, littered with reddish soil and chalk-colored road surfacing. There's not a trace of green on one side or the other. But nude tree trunks, scorched and burned, their torn-up roots in the air, lie in every direction. Enormous blocks of stone. Some old drums. Truck bodies caved in, eaten with rust and half buried in the ground.

Our work ? — staying here. When the bombs fall, we have to scramble up the hill, count the craters to fill, locate the bombs that didn't go off and detonate them. They call us the "Road-Scouts Group", name which both evokes and stimulates heroism. Our work, though, is not that simple. Often enough we get buried during a bombing, and then we go back down the hill, our faces so covered with dirt that only our eyes show — and our teeth as we

smile. These are the times when we call each other "black-eyed devils".

Our unit really looks after us. When supplies arrive, they always pick the best "For our scouts all alone up on the hill."

Understandable. The unit only comes out on the road at dusk, sometimes, it's true, for the whole night. But we, all day long, walk up and down on the hill. And full daylight on the hill is nothing to laugh about. Because death never jokes. It hides in the belly of the bombs. Look, I have a wound in the thigh which isn't healed yet. Naturally I didn't go to the military hospital. Everything has its good side, doesn't it? Really, tell me where you can find this: earth that smokes, air that trembles, the roar of planes fading as they go away? Nerves taut to the breaking point, the heart pounding insanely, knees knocking together with the knowledge that all around there are unexploded bombs that might go off any second. Anyway, they'll explode sometime, no matter what. Then, once the work is done, throw a last glance at the road, heave a deep sigh of relief and scramble quickly down to the cave again. Outside, 30-degree C. heat, inside another world. The cold suddenly makes you shiver. Heads up, we swallow a quarter or even all of a canteen with great gulps. Spring water, sweet. Then we lie on the damp soil, eyes half closed, listening or not listening to the music which drifts from a transistor radio always kept with fresh batteries. We either listen or dream.

It seems that we are going to begin a fantastic campaign. Every night an endless stream of vehicles files along the road. Usually we can sleep at night. But not now. We climb on our strategic height, we shovel and pick — and make jokes with passing drivers. Not all three of us, though. The one who cannot laugh is the girl who has to stay at the telephone in a shelter.

It is noon. How unusual the silence! Sitting with my back against the rock wall of the cave, I begin to sing softly. I love to sing. Whatever the music, I make up words. Neither head-nor-tail words, sometimes so funny that I have to laugh all by myself.

I come from Hanoi. Not too ugly. Soft, thick hair, slim neck. Eyes... well, the drivers say, "What a faraway look!"

Far away? To where? It doesn't matter. The fact is that I like to look at my eyes in the mirror. They are almond slim, black pupils, eyelids folded a little like they are in bright sunlight.

I don't know why the artillery men and the drivers ask about me — through someone else, or even with long letters, as if we were separated by kilometers when, as a matter of fact, they are all around and we can see each other every day. I'm not very forward. When my comrades stand bantering with some smoothtalking soldier, I usually stay apart, arms crossed, looking somewhere else, my lips pressed together. Of course, it's just a pretence. The truth is that I think these men in uniform with the star on their cap are the most handsome, intelligent, courageous and noble in the world.

Naturally I don't tell anyone this. But the men who pass on the road always talk to me cordially and respectfully.

"That's understandable," my companions tell me as a sort of explanation, "you not only sing well and you're pretty but you destroy bombs like a devil." Obviously, what they say is not very exact.

Outside, silence, heavy. Not a shadow of a plane has crossed the hill for ten hours. They're bombing farther south — the roar comes from that direction. And it is just this distant roar in the middle of the silence that predicts nothing good. The sun strikes hard. The wind has become dry. But in the cave it's chilly.

Nho embroiders a pillowcase. To each her own hobby. Nho embroiders, Thao copies the words of songs in a small notebook in her lap. They chat and I don't listen. But suddenly these words strike me: "When is it going to end?" It was Nho.

"What?" Thao doesn't raise her eyes, but her voice shows astonishment.

Nho yawns and doesn't answer. But I know what she means: that when the war is over she will ask to be assigned to a central hydroelectric station. She'll be a welder, play on the factory's volleyball team and may be even be selected for the national team.

For Thao, it's medicine. Her husband will be a captain, often away on duty, with a beard from ear to ear. She doesn't want a man constantly hanging around under her feet, because, she says, love would lose its flavor.

Me, too, I like to speak of my future projects. Big projects, but what to be ? An architect ? Excellent. Announcer in a children's cinema, crane operator in a mining port, or member of a workers' choir on a construction site ? Happiness is anywhere. Anywhere I can prove my zeal and initiative, like now, here on this hill. We can almost say the hill is the cradle of our dreams and projects.

But all that's for later, after the war, when the road we protect today will be paved and smooth. When high-tension lines will penetrate the deep forest and lumbering will go on day and night. All three of us believe that, strongly.

On her small white pillowcase, Nho embroiders flowers with violent colors, a little roughly. Her embroidered lines are too thick. If we tell her this, she goes right on as if nothing had happened. If our criticism gets a little stronger, she bites off a thread with her regular teeth and snaps, "I do it that way to make it stand out more !"

Original, if anything, that girl. Sweet, gay — and stubborn as a mule. Character traits which aren't contradictory but complement each other and form a rather rare personality. We have lived together since I came here. Everything seemed strange to me then. I was astonished when I had to carry earth. "What ?" I protested. "Is this what the Youth Volunteers do, carry dirt ?" I had imagined that the Youth Volunteers carried rifles on their shoulders and made the forest ring with their marching feet in the dark night, now and then exchanging laconic words snapped out like slogans.

But I went to carry dirt just the same. Then it became a habit.

Many times at meals we didn't have any soup to make the rice go down. We just washed it down with water. Seeing this, the men set up a clamor of pity. In our first experience with bombs, some of us new ones fainted.

But now we're used to it.

I arrived in the unit after Nho. That day, a little lost, I hung my pack on the trunk of a tree behind the camp. Nho was coming back from the river with her hair dripping water. Small drops on her forehead, on her nose. No shortage of water here, I thought. May be even swimming. Nho stopped when she saw me, just a second, then without saying a word she approached slowly, wringing out her wet towel. Nodding her head, she looked me over from my head down to my canvas shoes which I was rubbing together to get the mud off. "What unit do you come from ?" she asked. "What town ? What's your name ?"

I stopped rubbing my shoes together and put myself on guard. In military training at school I had learned how to box. Fists on my hips in a defence position, I thought "Do I have to hit her ? Where, to begin with ? And if she fights back, I'll give her one of those paralysing blows... just a little pressure, very slight, at one precise point of the hand."

But she had already turned on her heals and, nodding again with her hands in her pockets, she entered the CP and I could only follow.

We kept our eye on each other from that day on. Little by little we got to know each other and became friends, I forget since when. We're both 16 years old. That a veteran should take an air of superiority vis à vis a tenderfoot, there was nothing to make a fuss about. I really began to love her. A wonderful character. The men know that they must not come too close to her, although she lets people tease her easily.

Just like me. Nho likes to live free. We tell each other: "To love, yes, of course. But get married? Never! What a horror! Diapers, covers, mosquito nets, cooking and what else? No more time to go walking. A boyfriend, though, will take us to the cinema, be nice to us when we look angry, and we will be able to read as much as we want."

A boyfriend.

Nho already has one, a young mechanical engineer. He writes her interminable letters. "In spite of everything, one has more time in Hanoi than on the front line...", he excuses himself. He keeps a photo of Nho when she was two years old, which she gave him. It's a picture of a very little girl in pants and suspenders, black apron, a cloth hat with a large brim, a bouquet of wild flowers in her hand, at the foot of a hundred-year-old tree. Here is a sample of his prose which I have read several times: "I am fine. I like football. My muscles are developing! I look at your photo when you were two years old and can't imagine how you must look now. I say to myself: it is you, very small, with flowers in your hand. I will take you for a walk, buy you

candy and ask you where you want to go. Tell me, Uncle will carry you there..."

How funny! But we don't think of laughing at it. Gravely, we look towards the North. Hanoi, that we left a long time ago, Hanoi somewhere up there. It is here on this hill that we are growing up, but not even for one instant can we forget Hanoi.

I used to live in a small room on the first floor of an old house at the very end of a small lane full of trees so ancient that they were all covered with grey. At night sitting at my window, I used to look at the dark serried roofs, and sing one song after another with high spirits and a loud voice. My neighbor, a doctor who couldn't sleep very easily, would turn on the light and very courteously knock on the wall. This happened at least twenty times a month. I would be quiet, waiting for him to go to sleep meanwhile making a little defense speech to myself: "Only I know the clearness and immensity of the night in the city. In his difficult dreams, how can a doctor find a picture like the one now in front of my eyes?" My enthusiasm in singing almost caused me to fall out of the window once. I clutched the window sill with trembling hands, my head dizzy, and looked down into the abyss. Down there was a small water faucet which all night long kept dripping into a trough. The constant drip-drip gave me the impression that the water was going to reach my window. I went on singing, but in a lower voice, keeping my ear open for knocks on my wall.